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ABSTRACT

In 1987, the California State Department of Education issued "Caught in the Middle," a state policy document that called for extensive reform of the state's middle schools, including reductions in curricular tracking. Subsequent attempts to reduce tracking have frequently pitted reform-minded educators against resistant parents. This paper examines survey data from 373 California middle schools to evaluate the influence of various actors on school tracking policies. The paper explores the comparative influence of local educators and parents on detracking efforts and discusses the implications of professional and parental differences on tracking reform. A conclusion is that a confused institutional response has been made to the individual-group problem. The confusion not only stems from the strategic challenges of trying to provide everyone with learning, but also from the political problem of serving dual masters--convincing parents that schools operate in the best interests of their children while also convincing society that schools operate in the best interests of its future. Data were gathered through a survey of all 894 California middle schools, which elicited a 41.7 response rate. Nine tables are included. (Contains 33 references.) (LMI)

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PARENTS, PROFESSIONALS, AND THE POLITICS OF TRACKING POLICY

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Abstract

In 1987, the California State Department of Education issued *Caught in the Middle*, a state policy document that called for extensive reform of the state's middle schools, including reductions in curricular tracking. Subsequent attempts to reduce tracking have frequently pitted reform-minded educators against resistant parents. This article examines survey data from 373 schools to evaluate the influence of various actors on school tracking policies. The article explores the comparative influence of local educators and parents on detracking efforts and discusses implications of professional and parental differences on tracking reform.

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Parents, Professionals, and the Politics of Tracking Policy

Like other educational policy issues, tracking--the organization of curriculum and students into courses based on hierarchies of curricular content or prior student achievement--touches upon many facets of the educational enterprise. In doing so, it affects many people. As suggested by this cumbersome definition of terms, tracking policy penetrates students' lives by delineating the curriculum students cover and the classmates they encounter. Tracking policy also penetrates the professional lives of teachers by influencing what they teach, whom they teach, and perhaps even how they teach. In short, tracking guides the gathering together of students, teachers, and curriculum into *classes*, the organizational building blocks of formal schooling, the places where schools produce learning. Among other important resources, educators supply the curriculum and instruction for this productive effort, and parents, of course, supply the students. Because of these investments, and with their day-to-day experiences in schools shaped by policy adoption on this topic, educators and students' parents both take a personal interest in the consideration of tracking options.

In 1987, California's State Department of Education issued *Caught in the Middle*, an ambitious reform agenda that won widespread praise from middle school reformers. Among its many proposals, the document recommended sharp reductions in middle schools' use of curricular tracking. This paper examines the implementation of the state's tracking reform proposal, exploring

how local institutions responded to the reform and how these responses were influenced by the activities of key actors in school affairs--students' parents and local educators (teachers, school principals, and district policy makers).

The paper has six sections. The first section acquaints the reader with California's untracking effort by offering a brief history of the policy. The second and third sections then contrast two views of the politics of tracking--competing ideas about the way important actors link up with education policy in general, and with tracking policy in particular, to create political contexts for policy development. After the fourth section's description of the study's research methods, the fifth section focuses on professional and parental reactions to the state's initiative and their respective impact on schools' use of tracking. In light of these findings, the final section reconsiders tracking, educational politics, and the role played by parents and professionals in educational reform.

My objective in these pages is to gauge the political dynamic created by two elemental forces in schooling: parents and professional educators. My argument is that parents and educators hold radically different interests in education as an institution, that these interests lead parents and educators to view the merits of tracking and untracking from vastly different perspectives, and that these perspectives shape the formation of curricular structures. Before pressing this argument any further, however, a brief history of California's untracking reform is in order.

California's Untracking Reform

In the 1980s, tracking came under severe attack in such popular publications as John Goodlad's (1983) *A Place Called School*, Jeannie Oakes' (1985) *Keeping Track*, and the Carnegie Foundation's (1989) *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the Twenty-first Century*. The critiques offered by Goodlad and Oakes were based on their work at UCLA's Graduate School of Education, an influential source of educational scholarship in California. The criticism of tracking middle school students coalesced in a California State Department of Education policy document, *Caught in the Middle*, in 1987. Representing the culmination of hearings and research by Superintendent Bill Honig's Middle Grade Task Force, the document expressed a desire to move the organization of junior high students away from tracking and toward heterogeneous grouping. The report states:

> Heterogeneous grouping practices should be normative in middle grade classrooms. If permanent or semipermanent "ability" grouping or tracking occurs for all or most of a student's school day, substantial harm can result. Researchers are invariably consistent in their conclusion that large numbers of poor and minority students, in particular, are precluded from realizing the true meaning of equal access when tracking occurs. (California State Department of Education 1987: 56)

The department's task force included representatives from the major academic, ethnic, and governance subdivisions of the state's education community. Echoing the earlier indictment by Goodlad and Oakes, *Caught in the Middle* asserts that tracking harms the education of poor and minority students.

The anti-tracking stance of *Caught in the Middle* subsequently turned up in the subject area curriculum frameworks released by the department (CSDE 1987a; CSDE 1990). In California, the curricular frameworks and program quality review (PQR) criteria serve as institutional mechanisms conveying state policy to local districts. Curricular frameworks spell out the state's position on the content of school subjects; program quality review criteria notify the schools of the standards state PQR teams will apply in audits of their performance. Although couched in the flexible language typical of such documents, the PQR criteria issued in 1988 reflected the state's concern with tracking, stating in the section describing exemplary instructional practices: "Heterogeneous grouping is a feature of the school. Ability grouping and tracking are not the only grouping strategies of the classroom or the school organization" (CSDE 1988: 38).

With the stated purpose of benefitting poor and minority students, the state's detracking policy espouses redistributive objectives. That is, detracking falls under the heading of governmental strategies designed to correct social ills, to benefit the disadvantaged, and to reduce inequities (Peterson, Rabe, and Wong 1986). In this case, the body of knowledge that tracked structures exclusively allocate to honors and advanced classes (i.e., Shakespeare's plays, physics, calculus) becomes the object of redistribution--redistributed into classes composed of students from all ability levels. We know that different

kinds of policies engender different kinds of politics. Redistributive proposals often stimulate a politics populated by actors polarized around socioeconomic interests (Lowi 1964), and the tracking debate is no exception. In the literature critical of tracking, for instance, tracking's defenders are often portrayed as wealthy, white elites receiving unfair privilege from curricular differentiation (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Oakes 1985).

Because of the state's principled egalitarianism and its heterogeneous political constituency, redistribution can sometimes gather support at the state level. The lesson from several policy domains, however, is that redistributive policies are vulnerable in the hands of local implementers (Ervin and Watson 1986). Losers from the state pluralist arena may resurface in communities where they are powerful enough to disrupt implementation. When these opponents are clients, they are especially potent in their ability to shape policy outcomes (Berman 1978; Lipsky 1980). Notwithstanding its support from the state department of education, detracking's redistributive thrust jeopardizes its acceptance at the local level.

The losers in the detracking decision soon became evident. The California Association for the Gifted (CAG), an advocacy group supporting educational programs for gifted students (and a supporter of Bill Honig's campaigns for state superintendent) publicly opposed the untracking policy. Two years after the release of *Caught in the Middle*, CAG made a small gain in its

battle. Responding to mounting criticism that many middle schools were eliminating honors programs in the name of detracking, Superintendent Honig sent an open directive to all districts in April, 1989 stating, "There has also been some misunderstanding with regard to the Model Curriculum Standards and curriculum frameworks...A core curriculum is not the same as a standard curriculum" (Intercom May 1989: 2). Honig went on to add, "Even as I say this, I urge you, also, to refrain from the abusive tracking practices that place a child early in his or her school years into tracks from which the child cannot emerge and in which he or she is not adequately challenged." By condemning the excesses of both tracking and detracking, Honig's ambivalence on this issue was resolved in the following message: fight the illness without killing the patient.

To sum up California's experience, the claim of tracking critics that poor, minority, and low achieving students are harmed by ability grouping found backing in state policy. Based on these concerns for equity, a redistributive policy emerged--state education policy recommended the untracking of middle schools' curricula. The losers in the policy decision, groups representing the needs of gifted students, continued to fight implementation of the state position at the local level, but the odds weighed heavily against them. The state mechanisms for implementation of curricular policy--frameworks, model curriculum guides, and program quality review criteria--echoed the new policy.

Seemingly, California's movers and shakers in education policy--scholars, politicians, and bureaucrats--now spoke with one voice on the tracking issue. Despite some softening language from the state superintendent, professional, political, and scholarly wisdom had converged to condemn tracking. In urging districts and schools to abandon tracking, state policy now needed to find hospitable local environments for implementation. As we shall see, educational leaders are not the only important players at the local level, and local policy adoption can be quite different from adopting policy at the state level.

The Critical Explanation of the Politics of Tracking

In drawing up their indictment of tracking, reformers frequently employ dramatic imagery to depict the important actors in the controversy. A common characterization portrays the critics of tracking as defenders of democracy, trail blazers for social equity, and noble protectors of children. Tracking's supporters, on the other hand, are depicted as thoughtless traditionalists or selfish guardians of privilege. These portraits borrow heavily from critical theorists' conceptualizations of social conflict and social change.

The opposition to tracking reform by parents of high achieving youngsters has not gone unnoticed by reformers. In an interview, for instance, Jeannie Oakes describes the parents opposed to school untracking efforts as:

> ... people who have precocious children and who have, over the last 40 years in

> particular, won special programs and special advantages for their children. White and wealthier families, in particular, have fought to maintain a system that guarantees that their children will have a rich curriculum, extraordinarily well-qualified teachers, a peer group who is very much like them in terms of background and values and interests. The political pressure from these groups to maintain that system is extraordinarily great--the countervailing force that makes educators feel so very insecure." (O'Neil 1992: 20-21)

Sara Lake (1988) and Jonathan Kozol (Scherer 1992) are among those who have offered similar descriptions of tracking's supporters.

The historical narrative I have sketched above easily conforms to this imagery. California's anti-tracking reform does indeed place great value on innovation, equity, and democratic practices, and the most vocal defenders of tracking have been from the ranks of gifted education, an easy target for the elitist tag. The critical story begins to unravel, however, when we consider the power these competing voices have brought to the tracking debate in the state. In a curious exchange of roles, the formidable machinery of the state's educational bureaucracy is pitted against social elites, against those with "special advantages" from tracking. The critical view surely predicts a state department of education captured by elites, erecting obstacles to reform, and championing the use of tracking in schools. But this did not happen. In California's experience with untracking, the critical view fails to explain the relative powerlessness of tracking advocates at the state level, the

writing of redistributive language into state policy, or the institutional press toward heterogeneous grouping. At the state level, the politics and the policies are all wrong.

I suspect that the critical view will also fail to explain the local implementation of the state's policy recommendation. In addition to its flirtation with demagoguery, the critical view's depiction is too ambitious in claiming to know what motivates individual actors and not ambitious enough in revealing the subtle linkages between actors and institutions. It sees the interaction of individuals and the educational system as one primarily brokering the distribution of status, power, and wealth. It rests comfortably on the assumption that actors weigh questions of policy based almost exclusively on self-interests tethered to these distributions, self-interests that actors themselves can readily define, anticipate, and defend.

Like the critical theorists, I am not privy to the psychology of the actors involved in tracking's politics, so demonstrating the inaccuracy of this portrayal is beyond my means. I will offer, however, patterns of policy implementation that pose a plausible alternative to the prevailing story. To do that, I need to present an alternative motivational scheme--one as compelling as class-based self-interest--for the actors in this conflict.

An Alternative Explanation of the Politics of Tracking

Beyond unvarnished self-interest, this topic, like many educational topics, triggers deeper, more complex responses from individuals. Policy signifies what institutions stand for and against; it defines the institutional goals and practices that undergird an organization's identity; it symbolizes the values which an organization holds dear. As state, district, and school policy makers negotiate policy on curricular differentiation, symbolic notions tug at the corners of the discussion.

This is not to claim that practical considerations are completely absent from the tracking controversy. To be sure, when listening to the tracking debate, one hears questions addressing educational efficiency--which produces more learning, heterogeneous grouping or homogeneous grouping? What about students' self-esteem and their social skills? Do high achieving or low achieving students benefit from tracking? These questions have not received clear answers, however. More than sixty years of research on these questions has supplied an inexhaustible stream of ammunition for both sides in the tracking wars (see Slavin 1990 and Kulik 1992 for contrasting reviews of the literature). As a consequence, both tracking advocates and tracking critics tend to fall back on symbolic rhetoric for their arguments, arguments reminding us that circumstances sometimes compel the coexistence of contradictory values in our most cherished institutions.

These circumstances come into focus when we attempt to

prioritize such ideals as craft, knowledge, and democracy, ideals with different heft in different settings. Contradictions are difficult to avoid when articulating the guiding principles for our society, for our classrooms, or for our families. As agents of the state, educators act in the best interests of groups of students--students filling classrooms, grade levels, schools, and districts. Parents make decisions in the best interests of individual sons and daughters. Because of these differences, we do not consider good teaching and good parenting to be synonymous or ideal teachers and ideal parents to be interchangeable. Each fulfills a distinctive role in the individual child's life and in the social structure. A conundrum emerges from serving as the guardian of groups versus the guardian of individuals--a result that Thomas F. Green (1983) calls "conflicts of aggregation."

Green (1980) argues that this aggregation discrepancy presents difficulties for education policy. He notes how it sharpens the roles of actors in educational policy debates and stokes the fires of controversy on issues addressing equity and achievement. Families embody relationships that are particularistic, not universal, and because of this even such powerful social commitments as equal opportunity are cast in a different light. As Green explains:

> This difference between parental interests and state interests is vital. Its implications are enormous. For example, the state may have an interest in securing equal educational opportunity for all children within its jurisdiction. Indeed, in many modern states, the advancement of such an interest may be deemed a fundamental duty.

> Parents, however, (with notable exceptions) are unlikely to view equal opportunity as an ultimate goal or interest. What parents want is not that their children have equal opportunity, but that they get the best that is possible, and that will always mean opportunities "*better* than some others get." (Green 1980: 25)

I want to use the basic architecture of Green's argument to depict the motives of professionals and parents in the tracking debate. Tracking is an issue that brings us face to face with a central dilemma of schooling in a democracy: being an educator may require one to place supreme value on benefits to the general welfare; being a parent may require one to make the advancement of the individual paramount. Despite the assumptions of the critical theorists, these differences are not rooted in the expanse that separates the wealthy from the dispossessed and the selfish from the altruistic but in the different purposes of two institutions: families and state systems of education. Since schools try to serve both states and families, this profound dilemma animates virtually all policy making in education.

I try to respect this dilemma while investigating the politics of untracking California's middle schools. To do so, the tracking story told here interprets many familiar events from an unusual outlook. I begin from a modest starting point--from the assumption that professionals and parents bring different perspectives to matters of schooling. Although efforts to untrack schools provoke great controversy, accounts from the field agree on a common sequence of events--tracking reform initiated by professionals and, if opposed at all, opposed by

parents (Oakes and Lipton 1992; O'Neil 1992). My research concurs with this sequence but in contrast to the assumptions of critical explanations, I assume that parents primarily see the educational interests of their individual children at stake in the tracking debate -- not social status, political power, or economic wealth. Proceeding from these premises, one can expect parents to look upon the tracking issue from a different perspective than teachers and principals, and neither heroes nor villains are necessary to understand why.

Educators' professional responsibilities are largely defined by group level interactions; policies are adopted and applied to groups of students, not individuals--and applied not just to current students, but to future students as well. On many policy issues, educators serve as a counterpoint to individualistic parental concerns. As advocates of reform, educators who support detracking have the interests of more than one student in mind. Conflicts such as these raise political questions, and the democratic governance of schools must be reckoned with in an examination of local tracking decisions. Issues debated before elected school boards, boards vested with state constitutional authority over district policy, involve more than just local educators. Organized advocates, including parents, support one side or another in policy battles before local boards. School boards sort out these arguments and decide which will prevail. School board meetings are the forums where distinct professional and parental perspectives meet.

Built into the governance structure of schools, then, is the recognition that schooling is not only part of the professional lives of educators and the educational lives of students, but also part of the political lives of communities. The decision to track or to untrack may pique ideological, professional, or parental interests in schooling, interests that introduce flesh and blood actors into the drama of local policy adoption. How these actors shape schools' curricular structures is what we will now explore.

Sample

In the 1990-1991 school year, I conducted a survey of all California middle school principals at schools with 6-8, 7-8, and 7-9 graded configurations. Since the school is the appropriate level of analysis for this study, school principals were the targeted participants. The survey asked respondents several questions about their schools' tracking policies, including the current and past number of ability grouped classes in academic subjects, whether their school boards had discussed tracking policies, and who exercised influence in the creation of these policies. The 373 survey responses represent 41.7% of the 894 middle schools in the state, a response rate in line with other surveys of this type. Because the sampling design allows for self-selection of respondents, however, the data can only afford preliminary tests of influences on tracking policy, and generalizability of findings is limited to this sample alone.

The survey supplied all of the data for these analyses except for school socioeconomic index, which was provided by the 1990 California Assessment Program's data base. Though twenty-three schools were visited during the course of the study, and 175 interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and counselors--shaping my thinking on the politics surrounding tracking--the case study information will not receive explicit attention here. I shall probe for trends in implementation of the state's tracking reform by examining contingency tables of school level data from the survey.[1] I begin by looking at the progress of untracking after the release of *Caught in the Middle*.

Data Analysis

A dichotomy was created to express each school's curricular policy as tracked or untracked. Schools offering only heterogeneous grouping in either eighth grade English or mathematics were coded as untracked; all other schools were coded as tracked.

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[1]This study's original presentation discusses the methods used for collecting and coding data (Loveless 1992). The case studies are used extensively to examine subject area differences in tracking policy in Loveless, 1994.

TABLE 1

TRACKING POLICIES IN 1986 AND 1990
(Eighth grade English and mathematics)

YEAR	UNTRACKED	TRACKED	TOTAL
1986	93 (27.4%)	247 (72.7%)	340
1990	173 (48.7%)	182 (51.3%)	355

NOTE: Untracked refers to the number of schools offering only 1 level in either subject; tracked refers to schools offering more than 1 ability level in both subjects.

Using these criteria, Table 1 displays the progress of untracking from 1986 to 1990, and as indicated by the data, considerable untracking occurred. The proportion of untracked schools in the sample increased from roughly one quarter to one half, a near doubling of untracked schools during this period of reform.

The principals were also asked to assess the influence of various actors on their schools' 1990 tracking policy. Table 2 displays the principals' ratings of six key actors' influence.

TABLE 2

RATINGS OF ACTOR INFLUENCE ON TRACKING POLICY

ACTOR	N	MEAN	MEDIAN	SD	SE
State Policy Makers	349	2.332	2.00	.946	.051
District Policy Makers	351	2.775	3.00	.884	.047
Principals	359	3.201	3.00	.776	.041
Teachers	361	3.175	3.00	.778	.041
Parents	356	2.354	2.00	.800	.042
Community Groups	332	1.596	1.00	.773	.042

Note: Influence ratings were reported on a four-level scale:
(1) no influence, (2) moderate influence, (3) considerable influence, (4) great influence.

Not surprisingly, the principals rate themselves (mean=3.201) and their teachers (3.175) as most influential in formulating tracking policies. Next, in order of influence, are district policy makers (2.775), parents (2.354), state policy makers (2.332), and community groups (1.596). Generally speaking, professionals exercise more sway over policy than non-professionals, and actors who are part of the school's environment have more influence than actors from outside the school. These rankings indicate that the priorities of state policy makers take a back seat to local educational concerns when tracking policy is adopted. State policy constitutes only one factor in the calculus of local policy making, and it is by no means the most important factor in developing tracking policy. For the state's untracking recommendation to take root in local

school practice, the interests of local actors must support a diminution of tracking; the state must find allies at the ground level of the system.

Table 3 identifies who these allies might be, showing the influence ratings for each group of actors disaggregated by the type of policy adopted at schools. Several things are interesting about the ratings in this table.

TABLE 3

Actor Influence on Type of Tracking Policy (means and standard errors)

Actor	Untracked	Tracked
State Policy Makers	2.258 (.072)	2.400 (.073)
District Policy Makers*	2.667 (.068)	2.870 (.068)
Principals	3.220 (.061)	3.200 (.058)
Teachers	3.261 (.056)	3.100 (.061)
Parents**	2.186 (.058)	2.492 (.062)
Community Groups	1.546 (.055)	1.629 (.064)

Note: Influence ratings were reported on a four-level scale:
(1) no influence, (2) moderate influence, (3) considerable influence, (4) great influence.

* $p < .05$ for difference in untracked and tracked means.
** $p < .01$ for difference in untracked and tracked means.

First, parents and district officials exhibit significantly different degrees of influence in tracked and untracked systems. They are not allies of untracking, however; both actors appear to work against the state's reform. Since parents and district

policy makers have such markedly different relationships with schools (we usually think of one group as the system's client, the other as the system's leaders), their similar effect on school tracking policy is puzzling. Later, I will discuss in some depth how this association might have developed.

Teachers and principals give the greatest support to untracking; the difference in teachers' means is a nearly significant p=.054. The widely reported studies critical of tracking are percolating through the educational system, and professional norms on the tracking issue are probably changing. Indeed, when the *English Journal* asked readers to express their sentiments on tracking, not a single respondent defended the practice (English Journal 1990). With considerable pressure on educators to stay on "the cutting edge" of school reform, schools where untracking is taking place have site professionals on board.

Principal and teacher support for detracking suggests that the issue creates two divisions among local actors. One exists between levels of the local system; educators at schools, both principals and teachers, seem more supportive of tracking reform than district officials. The other exists at school sites, where the tracking issue divides teachers and principals from their clients--the parents of students.

Surprisingly, increased state influence is slightly correlated with tracking, not with detracking. In untracked schools, the rating for state policy maker influence is less than

in tracked schools (2.258 versus 2.400). The nature of state policy no doubt contributes to this anomaly. Despite the widely publicized state position on the dangers of curricular differentiation, justification for tracking can be found in other areas of state educational policy. Advocates can cite state funding of gifted programs, for instance, to support the need for tailoring curriculum to the achievement profiles of advanced students. Proponents of special remedial classes may point to state compensatory funding, efforts to boost literacy, and programs targeting at-risk youth to indicate that the state endorses differentiation of curriculum. Thus, in addition to the statements issued by the state superintendent, other ambiguities in state policy may sap the strength of the state's detracking message (DeLany 1991).

Implementing tracking reform is predominantly a local story, however. It is the divergence between principals and teachers on one side of the reform and parents on the other side that immediately draws one's attention. A closer look at the disparate influence of parents and professional educators brings us to the central topic covered in the introduction.

Tables 4A, 4B, and 4C display three separate comparisons of parent and professional influence on tracking policy, contrasting the effect of dominant parent influence with that of district policy makers, school principals, and teachers.

TABLE 4A

Comparing Parent and District Policymaker Influence on Tracking Policy

Actors' Influence	Untracked	Tracked	Total
Parent Influence Equal or Dominant	82 (45.3%)	99 (54.7%)	181 (54.2%)
District Policymaker Influence Dominant	76 (49.7%)	77 (50.3%)	153 (45.8%)
Total	158 (47.3%)	176 (52.7%)	334

chi-square = .635, 1 df, p = .43

NOTE: The first row refers to schools with parent influence ratings equal to or greater than the ratings for district policymakers. The second row refers to schools with district policymaker ratings greater than the ratings for parents.

TABLE 4B

Comparing Parent and Principal Influence on Tracking Policy

Actors' Influence	Untracked	Tracked	Total
Parent Influence Equal or Dominant	46 (38.3%)	74 (61.7%)	120 (35.5%)
Principal Influence Dominant	113 (51.8%)	105 (48.2%)	218 (64.5%)
Total	159 (47.0%)	179 (53.0%)	338

chi-square = 5.663, 1 df, $p < .05$

NOTE: The first row refers to schools with parent influence ratings equal to or greater than the ratings for principals. The second row refers to schools with principal ratings greater than the ratings for parents.

TABLE 4C

Comparing Parent and Teacher Influence on Tracking Policy

Actors' Influence	Untracked	Tracked	Total
Parent Influence Equal or Dominant	40 (33.3%)	80 (66.7%)	120 (35.3%)
Teacher Influence Dominant	121 (55.0%)	99 (48.2%)	220 (64.7%)
Total	161 (47.4%)	179 (52.6%)	340

chi-square = 14.621, 1 df, $p < .001$

NOTE: The first row refers to schools with parent influence ratings equal to or greater than the ratings for teachers. The second row refers to schools with teacher ratings greater than the ratings for parents.

Table 4A, for instance, contrasts the effect of district policy makers and parents on tracking policy. The two rows contain the schools' influence classifications. Schools indicating parent influence equal to or greater than district policy maker influence are classified into the first row; schools indicating district influence greater than parent influence are classified into the second row. In this comparison, the chi-square statistic indicates very little difference in the effect of parents and district policymakers on tracking policy, similar to the comparison of ratings for the same two actors in Tables 2 and 3.

Tables 4B and 4C, however, show significant variation in policy adoption when parent influence is compared to that of principals and teachers. Schools with dominant parent influence

are more likely to resist the untracking push than schools with principal or teacher dominance. The discrepancy is most noticeable with the parent-teacher comparison in Table 4C. Though only 33% of the schools with parents more influential than teachers adopted untracking policies (40 out of 120), 55% of the schools with teachers more influential than parents managed to adopt the reform (121 out of 220).

The divergence of professional and parental influences on tracking policy is evident, and as indicated by the increasing chi squares down the three tables (4A, 4B, 4C), this divergence grows as we shift our attention from professional actors at the district level (district policy makers) to the school level (principals) to the classroom level (teachers). The mechanisms for articulating nonprofessional influence on school policy exist at the district level, the level of democratic governance in the educational system, rendering district officials susceptible to the concerns of organized groups of parents. As school site educators often lament, the district office can even place parents and educators on equal footing in conflicts over school policy. A district forum also allows disgruntled parents to muster political support on a volatile issue like tracking.

The school is a different place. With its "egg-crate" organizational design, the school inhibits formation of parent coalitions across classrooms or across course sequences. Parents with misgivings about a school's tracking policy might complain to their child's teacher or perhaps to the principal, and they

might even succeed in gaining supporters from the parents of their child's classmates, but few formal avenues exist to foment schoolwide resistance. To a large extent, schools are buffered from the uncertainties of political decision making. Ideally, accommodating the exigencies of political pressure is a chore shouldered by school district officials so that principals and teachers may go about the professional tasks associated with teaching and learning.

At least one structural difference between tracked and untracked schools probably contributes to the patterns we have discovered in these data. Parents from untracked systems are more likely to take complaints to the district office than parents from differentiated systems. Tracked systems possess programmatic options for accommodating parental complaints that untracked systems lack. In a tracked system, complaints typically are individualistic in scope, involving a single student's course assignment or class schedule, problems that can be rectified by moving the student from one class to another. In an untracked system, however, these individual complaints inherently indict the entire structure; theoretically, at least, there are no curricular alternatives. Parents who object to the untracking of their school often have only one recourse--an appeal to the district office--thereby triggering a chain of political events.

One way to detect whether parental resistance to untracking has manifested itself as political activity is to examine the interaction of two variables--parent influence and the discussion of tracking by school boards. In Tables 5A and 5B, the four level rating of parent influence is tabled with whether or not boards discussed tracking policy.

TABLE 5A

Parent Influence on Tracking Policy with No School Board Discussion

Parent Influence Rating	Untracked	Tracked	Total
No Influence	9 (52.9%)	8 (47.1%)	17 (14.0%)
Moderate Influence	35 (59.3%)	24 (40.7%)	59 (48.8%)
Considerable Influence	19 (52.8%)	17 (47.2%)	36 (29.8%)
Great Influence	2 (22.2%)	7 (77.8%)	9 (7.4%)
Total	65 (53.7%)	56 (46.3%)	121

chi-square = 4.353, 3 df, p = .226

We see in Table 5A that parents have a minimal impact on policy decisions when board discussion is absent. A majority of these schools without board discussion have detracked (53.7%), and the percentage of untracked schools remains fairly stable across the levels of parental influence (with the small counts in the great influence column providing an exception).

TABLE 5B

Parent Influence on Tracking Policy with School Board Discussion

Parent Influence Rating	Untracked	Tracked	Total
No Influence	16 (64.0%)	9 (36.0%)	25 (11.7%)
Moderate Influence	49 (49.5%)	50 (50.5%)	99 (46.5%)
Considerable Influence	23 (32.4%)	48 (67.6%)	71 (33.3%)
Great Influence	4 (22.2%)	14 (77.8%)	18 (8.5%)
Total	92 (43.2%)	121 (56.8%)	213

chi-square = 12.614, 3 df, $p < .01$

Parent influence on tracking policy requires school board deliberation to gain clout, and as Table 5B shows, parents have a dramatic effect on policy when their views are expressed in this political setting. When boards consider tracking policy, large discrepancies surface in untracking's success rate across levels of parent influence. Even the lowest rating of parent activity (moderate influence) dramatically alters outcomes. It appears that districts' governing boards have served as vehicles for parental protest on the tracking issue, with only 43.2% of schools untracking when boards publicly scrutinized the tracking issue. These data on school board deliberation also help to explain the district-school dichotomy noted earlier, as board attention apparently sways districts into sympathy with parents

on the tracking issue. Charged with mediating parental-professional tensions on the tracking issue, democratically elected school boards temper the zeal of professionals attempting to untrack school structures.

We have covered most of the ground promised in the introduction. A remaining concern is to examine how the redistributive objectives of untracking operate in light of the differences we have detected between parent and educator influence. To do this, I have returned to the parent-teacher influence comparison of Table 3 and decomposed these data by SES quartiles. I use the parent-teacher comparison because it provides the sharpest contrast of the effect of professional and parental influence. This information allows us to see whether the professional-parental differences on tracking policy hold up in different socioeconomic settings.

One caution is important. Like the other cross-classifications in this paper, the SES quartiles are derived from this sample of schools; they are not equivalent to quartile levels computed by the state for all schools serving eighth graders. Though both sorting methods show the same general patterns of actors' influence, the use of population-based criteria suggests generalizability, a claim this study's sampling design does not afford.

Table 6 displays the disaggregation of parent-teacher influence on tracking policy by school socioeconomic level.

TABLE 6

Comparing Parent and Teacher Influence on Tracking Policy by SES Quartile[2]

SES Quartile	Actors' Influence	Untracked	Tracked	Total
	Parent Dominant	12 (38.7%)	19 (61.3%)	31 (37.3%)
Quartile 1	Teacher Dominant	32 (61.5%)	20 (38.5%)	52 (62.7%)
Mean SES=2.08	Total	44 (53.0%)	39 (47.0%)	83
				chi-square=4.063, 1 df, p<.05
	Parent Dominant	10 (33.3%)	20 (66.7%)	30 (35.7%)
Quartile 2	Teacher Dominant	30 (55.6%)	24 (44.4%)	54 (64.3%)
Mean SES=2.73	Total	40 (47.6%)	44 (52.4%)	84
				chi-square=3.818, 1 df, p=.05
	Parent Dominant	12 (35.3%)	22 (64.7%)	34 (38.6%)
Quartile 3	Teacher Dominant	28 (51.9%)	26 (48.1%)	54 (61.4%)
Mean SES=3.14	Total	40 (45.5%)	48 (54.5%)	88
				chi-square=2.307, 1 df, p=.13
	Parent Dominant	6 (24.0%)	19 (76.0%)	25 (29.4%)
Quartile 4	Teacher Dominant	31 (51.7%)	29 (48.3%)	60 (70.6%)
Mean SES=3.77	Total	37 (43.5%)	48 (56.5%)	85
				chi-square=5.495, 1 df, p<.05

[2]The SES Index is constructed by the California State Department of Education based on the educational level of students' parents. The index ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 representing parents who did not graduate from high school and 5 representing parents with advanced degrees. Student SES data are aggregated to arrive at the school SES index, and the quartile mean refers to the average school SES index in the quartile (California State Department of Education, 1989).

In all four quartiles, schools with influential parents are associated with tracking policies, and schools with influential teachers are associated with untracking[2]. The parental-professional disparity we uncovered earlier persists across levels of SES, reaching statistical significance in the first, second, and fourth quartiles.

Two elements of this table are intriguing. First, parents in the lowest SES quartile schools exercise slightly more influence over tracking policy than parents in the highest quartile schools. Whereas 37.3% of the low SES schools report dominant parent influence, only 29.4% of the high SES schools do so. The parents in this study's low SES schools appear considerably more active in school policy matters than similar parents in past studies of parent involvement (Wong 1990). This might be due to the elimination of remedial classes as part of untracking, a strategy with greater impact in low SES schools than high SES schools. It might also be attributable to a heightened sensitivity of low SES school principals to the desires of their clients. Whatever the reason, the point should not be lost--over one-third of the principals in low SES schools described their schools' parents as equal to or more influential than their schools' teachers when it comes to tracking policy.

Another interesting finding directly addresses untracking's redistributive aims. A larger proportion of the lowest quartile

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[2]Using the statewide SES quartiles, the chi-squares are: Q1 (7.463, 1); Q2 (3.671, 1); Q3 (1.018, 1); Q4 (5.495, 1).

schools have implemented untracking than the highest quartile schools, 53% vs. 44%. In sum, these data do not support the notion that parents in low SES schools are less influential on tracking policy than parents in high SES schools; nor do they support the notion that schools in poorer neighborhoods are more likely to track their students than schools in wealthier neighborhoods.

These patterns indicate that a redistribution of tracking policy among schools in this sample is indeed taking place--poorer schools are adopting the policy purporting to benefit poorer students. Though this certainly suggests there is more to the tracking story than usually told, rather than rush to a rejection of critical perspectives, one must acknowledge that they remain tenable. Indeed, the fundamental objection to tracking is its disparate effect on students within schools, not among schools. This study's data describe school level phenomena. We do not know from these school level data the characteristics of influential parents--their race, gender, or socioeconomic backgrounds--leaving open the possibility of operative class interests. Additional studies should investigate whether the redistribution detected here is in fact taking place, and by collecting data on individual actors, discern their sentiments on tracking and their impact on policies.

Taken together, however, these analyses imply that the prevailing description of tracking's politics needs work. Considerable diffusion of detracking has occurred in California,

and though the reform has not been adopted by all schools, the forces influencing its implementation transcend the typical characterizations. The SES level of schools, for instance, seems to be of little importance in determining tracking policy, and if it matters at all, low SES schools lean towards detracking. The importance of overarching social structures pales in comparison to the importance of local actors. Professional educators, especially principals and teachers, exert the most crucial influence in support of untracking; parent influence works against the reform.

In addition to the parent-professional disparity, there also appears to be a division within local educational organizations. District policy makers have tended to support tracking--probably a by-product of parents influencing school boards. After examining the interaction of parent influence and school board deliberation, we learned that district school boards may serve as mechanisms communicating organized parent resistance to policy makers. School site educators, on the other hand, use their influence to initiate tracking reform. The politics of tracking and untracking are far more complicated than we previously have been led to believe.

Discussion

The fundamental conflict lurking beneath the politics of tracking is one of aggregation or scope--the friction between group and individual interests. It is impossible to think about tracking without coming face to face with this issue. Instead of

presenting this as a conceptual problem, or one of methodology, I have presented aggregation as an intractable political problem facing schools. The study's data illustrate a politics driven by actors who interpret curricular questions in either collective or individual terms. To professional educators, the significance of education is written in the plural; to parents, it is written in the singular. The impact of this discrepancy on California's tracking reform has been presented in this chapter primarily from the viewpoint of important actors. In this concluding discussion, I would like to approach the aggregation problem from another angle--from the perspective of the institution.

For a moment, imagine two scenarios, two fantasies where grouping students would be unnecessary. The first envisions a large room--large enough, in fact, to hold every student in the country. In this room, students receive common courses of instruction in all subjects; an identical set of experiences make up every student's school career. There is only one group and everyone belongs to it. The tracking issue is moot. Now imagine a second scenario. There are equal numbers of students and teachers. Each student has her own teacher, and instruction is tailored to match individual interests and competencies. Each student's school career consists of a unique set of experiences. Each student belongs to a group of one, and --again--the tracking issue is moot.

The real world of schooling exists somewhere between these two fantasies. In the fantasies, we can manipulate the balance

between groups and individuals by wishing one of them away. In the real world, space and time prevent realization of the first scenario; practical limits on resources prevent the second from ever occurring. Truthfully speaking, schools can provide neither the same education for all children nor an individualized education for each and every child. And yet, it is an incandescent myth of American schools that they somehow do both.

Sheer logistics require that students are divided into groups to accomplish teaching and learning. The divisions also succeed in associating a child with other children and with education as an institution. This is accomplished through a series of bureaucratic partitions; organizing students into ability levels is not the only way students are distributed within the educational system. Students who reside in district X are assigned to attend grade level Y within school Z, three ways in which a locale's pool of students are divided--in this case, once by age and twice by area of residence--long before a tracked or untracked curricular structure differentiates their schooling. The point cannot be overemphasized--untracking schools does not eliminate the grouping of students. It only eliminates grouping on one criterion, on the basis of prior achievement or the difficulty of the material to be learned. Though organizational imperatives guarantee that groupings will take place, the riddle of whose interests the entire enterprise should be geared to satisfy remains--children? parents? teachers? the state? the society?

Questions of interests, of course, quickly become questions of politics. Besides tracking, policies governing other student groupings are also known to cause a stir in local policy making. Drawing and redrawing school attendance boundaries, building new schools and closing old schools, deciding whether to offer combination or single-graded classes--these local educational issues easily incite community ire. From the system's perspective, proper decisions may emerge from organizational calculations that weigh projected costs (educational, financial, and political) against anticipated benefits (again--educational, financial, and political). From the individual parent's perspective, however, proper decisions are bound up with the myriad connections--some subtle and mysterious--one has with school. In his investigation of a community's political upheaval over school closure and consolidation, for instance, Alan Peshkin found parents to imbue schools with symbolic value far beyond the bounds of schools' educative function (Peshkin 1982). As I noted in the introduction, tracking is a practice infused with symbolic meanings. Such meanings contribute to school's institutional identity--and play a part in the politics of tracking policy.

Differentiating curriculum is one way schools have forged connections with parents, as shown by curricular differentiation's role in contemporary national debates on education. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, reformers promoted special programs to serve the needs of special populations of students (e.g., Head Start, Title I, Bilingual,

Special Education). Programs serving gifted students were also born at this time. The rise of gifted education in a time of social activism reveals an important point. Besides assisting in the campaign against social inequities, these programs served another capacity--to put a human face on the blank edifice of educational bureaucracy, to make education more individualized in its service. These programs represent an array of policies that did not reduce, and perhaps even enhanced, the stratification of curriculum in the schools. But they also said to families that special circumstances could be noticed and attended to in an increasingly impersonal world. The value of this signal can not be sifted from data on school effects, nor summarily dismissed as elitist when the special circumstances happen to be academic precocity.

As part of the Great Society, federal education policy fostered a pluralist politics with institutional ramifications. Every major group had its own program around which state bureaucrats, university researchers, administrators, teachers, and parents could rally. Almost overnight, fresh career paths materialized for young teachers and administrators who specialized in one type of program or another. Professionals overshadowed parents in the governance of these programs, even when client representation on oversight committees was legally mandated at the school level (Peterson, Rabe, and Wong 1986; Wong 1990).

The programs provided organizational validation for the belief that different kinds of students needed different kinds of educational experiences. By the late 1970s, however, a growing perception that many programs targeting disadvantaged populations were failing, and a growing public disenchantment with schools in general, called the basis of curricular differentiation into question. Critics of tracking capitalized on the discontent, charging that low achieving students failed because schools placed them in low tracks, that schools' curricular structures depressed the achievement of the very students they claimed to be helping in compensatory programs. Thus, the strategy of offering some students a remedial curriculum and other students an accelerated curriculum was found wanting. Structures offering equal access, full inclusion, and common curricula were urged, and what was once considered reactionary--a uniform curricular diet for all students--had become enlightened.

In short, we have witnessed a confused institutional response to the individual-group problem. The confusion not only stems from the strategic challenges of trying to provide everyone with learning, but also from the political problem of serving dual masters--convincing parents that schools operate in the best interests of their children while also convincing society that schools operate in the best interests of its future. This tension even surfaces within special programs, as reflected in the debates concernirg whether competency in English alienates bilingual students from their family's cultural roots, whether

Chapter I students should be pulled out of class for instruction, and whether special education students should be completely mainstreamed. In one way or another, all of these controversies involve the clash of group and individual interests.

California's experience with untracking suggests that the shifting tides of educational politics have not altered the fundamental particularism of parents. Since many states are adopting policies against tracking (according to Wheelock 1992, these states include Maryland, Massachusetts, and Nevada), more controversies loom ahead on this issue. As communities struggle with deciding the best course for their schools, the interplay of professional and parental perspectives will surely leave its mark on the local policies that emerge.

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